

Outside were three caricatures of secret policemen. In fact, they reminded me of the way Hergé drew such specimens in the Tin-tin books, but this was for real. I motioned them to sit down in the oversize armchairs and was somewhat relieved when they did.

“We have your passports”, said the boss-man, withdrawing them from his back pocket, “You are Larsen, she is Hansen. How?”. More relief . . . this began to look like the sort of thing you talk your way out of. I began a long exposé about Danish marriage customs, how women had their own passports, how we did not necessarily insist that married women changed surnames. No, of course I did not carry my marriage certificate – anyhow it was in Danish. We were on our way to take up a responsible, international post in Beirut. Could they really imagine I would arrive in Beirut with a woman who was not my wife? They finally left. I joined my girlfriend in the bath. She had hardly been able to stifle her laughter. Hurdle number two had been surmounted.

We left for Lebanon the next morning, arriving at Aarida at lunchtime. The last hurdle in a dangerous mission.

“*Passeport*” – still no please. They were examined in ominous silence for an inordinate length of time. Finally they were slapped down on the desk. “We cannot allow you to leave Syria”, the officer said in a deep, ominous voice. My heart sank again. They couldn't possibly have been in touch with the Danish marriage licensing authorities – after all there were no diplomatic relations.

“What is the problem?”, I enquired, in what I hoped was a both polite and assertive manner.

“You have been here two days”, said the officer, breaking into a smile, “you have not seen Damascus and Aleppo, you have not seen Palmyra, you have not seen the Crac de Chevaliers. How can you go to Syria and not see our wonderful country”. We assured him that we would, as soon as we were installed in Beirut. We were out of Syria.

I have visited Syria many times since. Damascus – and especially Aleppo – are wonderful cities; so was Homs until the security forces destroyed it. Palmyra and Crac de Chevaliers are amongst the finest sites in the Levant. the people are friendly, and the food fantastic. I'd still hate to tangle with the Mukhabarat though.— TORBEN B. LARSEN, 358 Coldharbour Lane, London SW9 8PL.

### **Red Admiral butterfly *Vanessa atalanta* (L.) (Lep.: Nymphalidae) in mid-February**

A Red Admiral in fine condition was seen by K.C. Lewis flying and settling in warm sunshine at 11.15am on 14.ii.1996 at the edge of Chalk Wood, Bexley, West Kent. February records of this butterfly appear to be few; another recent one is of a specimen flying at Firestone Copse, Havenstreet,

Isle of Wight, 2.ii.1995 (S.A. Knill-Jones, *Ent. Rec.* **107**: 252). The author remarks that this “supports further evidence that this species hibernates in this country during mild winters”. It is noteworthy that in the case of Mr Lewis's sighting, much of the winter preceding the butterfly's appearance had been anything but mild, reinforcing the conclusion just stated and suggesting that *V. atalanta* can tolerate a greater degree of winter cold than has usually been supposed. However, C.W. Plant (1987, *The Butterflies of the London Area*: 106) expresses the opposite view, that “apart from isolated incidents in the West Country, it is thought to be quite unable to survive the British winters . . .”, and indeed it is true that instances such as the two above do not of themselves prove resumption of normal activity in the spring.—A.A. ALLEN, 49 Montcalm Road, Charlton, London SE7 8QG.

### **Red Admirals *Vanessa atalanta* (L.) (Lep.: Nymphalidae) at sugar by day**

At my home address in Banffshire, a line of 24 fenceposts bordering a marsh with scrub is kept permanently sugared between early spring and late autumn. When present, Red Admirals regularly feed at this sugar in the daytime, especially in autumn. Numerous instances include six at once on 10.x.1994, and eight on 16.viii.1995. On the latter date there was sunlit *Buddleia* in full bloom only a few metres away.

As the sugar is spread on the north side of the posts, and some of the posts themselves are overhung by trees, the Red Admirals often have to feed in the shade. They do so, with closed wings, even when the weather is fairly cool. Generally, there is only one butterfly per post, with some hint of territoriality or guarding if another intrudes. Occasionally, one roosts overnight on its fencepost.

There are numerous references in the literature to Red Admirals partaking of over-ripe fruit or sap from wounded trees, but in an admittedly casual search I could find no reference to them coming to sugar. Perhaps few observers check their's during the daytime? No other species of butterfly has yet been seen at sugar at this site, but afternoon visits by the noctuids *Oligia fasciuncula* and *Celaena haworthii* are not uncommon.—ROY LEVERTON, Whitewalls, Ordiquhill, Cornhill, Banffshire AB45 2HS.

### **The Peacock butterfly *Inachis io* (L.) (Lep. Nymphalidae) in Shetland**

Although not always thought of as a migrant, the Peacock *Inachis io* spends most of its adult life on the move. According to Baker (1984, in Vane-Wright & Ackery (Eds.) *The Biology of Butterflies*), virtually all individuals migrate steadily through their lifetime, alternating cross-country travel with bouts of feeding, ovipositing, territoriality and basking. Nevertheless, the species is obviously not normally as much a migrant as its famous relatives,